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THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND HEAD OF THE RUSSIAN  
DELEGATION, AT PART I OF THE FIFTEENTH MEETING OF  
THE OSCE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM**

Vienna, 22 January 2007

**Opening session**

Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all allow me to thank the OSCE and the Austrian authorities for organizing this conference and for the opportunity to take part in the discussions we are about to have.

We believe that the problems we intend to discuss at the 15th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum are indeed of relevance to all participating States, and international co-operation is needed if we are to solve them.

The combating of desertification and land degradation is one of the most important issues facing mankind today, and we can already talk about the threat of an environmental disaster in some regions. Suffice it to say, according to experts almost half of the Earth's land mass is at risk of desertification.

Land degradation, regardless of its causes, has negative socio-economic consequences. This process leads to a reduction in land productivity and a decline in crop yields and in the productivity of livestock farming. This, in turn, results in lower incomes and a fall in the population's standard of living. A critical ecological situation also means a rise in the incidence of disease, higher mortality rates, shorter lifespans and the like.

Today more than 900 million people around the world are directly affected by desertification. In addition, around 10 million people are forced to migrate each year as a result of environmental degradation.

The question of the sustainable utilization of water resources is just as serious. At present, more than a billion people around the globe do not have access to safe drinking water and each year five million people die from related diseases. Fresh water resources and their sustainable management are extremely important for human health and basic human needs, food production, energy and ensuring sustainable development in general.

If the problems involved in ensuring careful practices in land and water use and in dealing with the damage already done to the environment are to be solved, a joint approach involving all interested parties — the State, non-governmental organizations and the business sector — is required.

I should like to mention that Russia, a country richly endowed with land and water resources, has considerable experience in dealing with problems caused by the unsustainable utilization of these resources.

However successful these efforts are, they can have little effect if they are limited to a single country. Globalization has increased the pressure on natural resources and calls for efforts to solve these problems to be co-ordinated at a transnational level.

The international community has recently adopted a wide range of strategic documents on such issues as combating land degradation and the problems of sustainable water utilization and the conservation of water resources. Nevertheless, the situation in these areas is still causing serious concern.

In the early 1990s, the Russian Federation began systematically to implement principles of sustainable development and environmental security. At the same time, our country is pursuing a liberal economic policy, ensuring the development of a free market and competition. Russia is open to foreign investment and is making its resources available for the implementation of mutually advantageous investment projects. In that connection, however, it must unfortunately be acknowledged that questions of environmental security are frequently at the bottom of the list when planning for and carrying out investment projects, including those involving foreign investment.

In the light of the above, we believe that the OSCE could help to solve problems connected with the development of environmentally friendly technologies and the protection of ecosystems, and could also promote the development of different forms of co-operation between environmental protection authorities and the business world. One way to do this could be to hold a series of conferences, involving representatives of the Russian authorities, public environmental protection organizations and businesses, including transnational businesses, on ensuring environmental safety when carrying out investment projects.

In that connection, we should like to see a careful analysis here in Vienna of the large volume of factual material gathered during the preparatory conference in Bishkek, as well as a clarification of the assessments of the situation in various parts of the OSCE area and concrete recommendations regarding the Organization's involvement in the work of the international community to ensure security in connection with land degradation and soil contamination — recommendations that are both realistic and in keeping with the interests of all the countries concerned.

I hope that the work of the Forum will be successful, the discussions productive and the informal consultations informative and useful.

Thank you for your attention.